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REFERENCES

Nicholas Grene. *The Theatre of Tom Murphy Playwright Adventure*. London, Bloomsbury, 2017, xiii + 252. Isbn 978-1-4725-6811-3

- 1 Tom Murphy has been an intriguing figure in Irish drama, well served up to this by scholars like Grene, Fintan O'Toole, Alexandra Poulain and Christopher Murray and this volume maintains the high standard of literary engagement. Tom Murphy's plays, at their best, are amongst the most powerful writings for the Irish stage over the past fifty years, and this is a substantial critical volume, edited and largely written by one of Ireland's leading scholars of the Irish theatre and 'Murphy's daring theatrical imagination' is what Grene is pursuing. This current study opens with a short and illuminating biographical account of Murphy's career and of his development as an artist and the key elements within his aesthetic formulation. It is clear that Grene knows Murphy well and he provides very useful details concerning Murphy's methods of composition. Grene recounts Murphy's upbringing in Tuam, his training as a welder and then as a teacher and on to his years in London as a successful dramatist in the 1960s. There, his early play, *A Whistle in the Dark* was first staged at the celebrated Theatre Royal, Stratford East and then transferred to the West End. Grene then traces the diverse results of his decision to return and live in Ireland in the 1970s, and outlines his time writing at the Abbey Theatre, with a number of distinctly unsuccessful experiments in different dramatic styles, with the later success of his play, *The Gigli Concert* in 1983. *The Gigli Concert* centres on an unnamed Irish businessman, on the brink of despair and breakdown, and music, specifically the voice of Beniamino Gigli is what the Irishman aspires to emulate, the soaring voice of longing and beauty for his embittered and lost soul and he transmits this longing for beauty to the volatile JPW King. Following this success, Grene recounts Murphy's time with Druid Theatre in

Galway in the 1980s, when *Bailegangaire*, his most profound and moving rendering of the blighted legacy of the West of Ireland, was realised. The key to the success of this play was the performance of Siobhan McKenna. A doyenne of Irish theatre, Siobhan McKenna, remade herself as the senile old woman in the bed Mommoo, a rambling old crone in a thatched cottage in the west of Ireland in 1984, telling the story of the laughing competition that resulted in the renaming of the town as Bailegangaire, the town without laughter. At the core of this play is the account of the laughing competition, a perfect metaphor for a rare moment of defiance in the lives of these misfortunate people. *Druid* and its director Garry Hynes was a key element in Murphy's success in the latter part of his career. Grene finds a way of encompassing the wide diversity of Murphy's dramatic experiments by identifying two dominant strands in his imaginative preoccupations. As he sees it, Murphy's works fall into two broad categories, in his own words, 'Plays grounded in Irish social realism and those which transcend any such limits in their imaginative conceptions.' Using this binary opposition, Grene breaks down his study of Murphy's plays into thematic chapters to pursue his interrogation of the many aspects to Murphy's imagination and his examination of his country. For example in his chapter, 'Predicaments of Irishmen', Grene notes that Murphy's representations of Irish masculinity, beleaguered and uneasy, were dominant in earlier plays like *A Crucial Week in the Life of A Grocer's Assistant* and the powerful *A Whistle in the Dark*. He connects much of the violence, unease and turmoil in Irish males around the constraints of the Catholic Church and the exclusionary nature of the Irish rural class system. His obsession with music is seen in his most successful Abbey Theatre play, *The Gigli Concert* and Grene comments that: 'The operatic voice counterpointing and contrasting the spoken dialogue as a measure of meaning beyond words and human action. In Murphy's plays operatic arias in all their perfect beauty sing out above the broken mess of unspeakable human lives.' Grene is at his strongest when he writes about Murphy's use of music. Finally, anticipating Lucy McDiarmid's concluding essay, Grene provides a chapter called 'The Lives of Women' and argues for a self-conscious difference in Murphy's representations of gender. Grene deals with the issue of Murphy's plays being, as he puts it tactfully, 'not so easily accessible to non-Irish audiences,' by including two essays from critics based outside Ireland, Alexandra Poulin and Lucy McDiarmid. McDiarmid's essay on *A Thief of A Christmas* and *Bailegangaire* follows Grene's own final chapter on the lives of women and provides a useful context for these linked Murphy plays and suggests that the events of Ireland in the early 1980s, the Kerry Babies case, for example and the Ann Lovett influenced Murphy's framing of these dramas. Likewise Alexandra Poulain used the critical essays of Francois Lyotard, in particular his 1988 essay, 'Survivant' to read *Bailegangaire* as a work that 'speaks forcefully to contemporary preoccupations about the nature of survival – about what it means to survive disaster and what responsibility it entails.' Both essays are perceptive, well-grounded in Murphy's oeuvre, sensitive to the traditions of Irish theatre, clear and to the point. Grene also includes a lengthy interview with Tom Murphy and traces Murphy's enduring influence on the contemporary Irish stage and provides renewed insight into this compelling dramatic imagination. Supported by an impressive and wide ranging bibliography and a lively and passionate writing style, in each chapter, Grene works across genre to provide an ongoing analysis of Murphy's imagination. Grene's own experience as a preeminent critic and his earlier work *Talking about Tom Murphy* 2002 and his magisterial 1999, *The Politics of Irish Drama* inform this impressive study. In addition, his extensive use of

interviews with Murphy in 2015 and his use of the archive allow him to state, as he does in his conclusion that, 'A playwright who disavows any political intention has nevertheless created a powerful vision of a small post-colonial country struggling to come to terms with modernity.' Tom Murphy has been well served by this scholarly and readable volume.